

The New York Times

Penny Marshall, 'Laverne & Shirley' Star and Movie Director, Dies at 75

By **Anita Gates**

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Penny Marshall, the nasal-voiced co-star of the slapstick sitcom “Laverne & Shirley” and later the chronically self-deprecating director of hit films like “Big” and “A League of Their Own,” died on Monday at her home in Los Angeles. She was 75.

Her publicist, Michelle Bega, said the cause was complications of diabetes. Ms. Marshall had in recent years been treated for lung cancer, discovered in 2009, and a brain tumor. She announced in 2013 that the cancer was in remission.

Ms. Marshall became the first woman to direct a feature film that grossed more than \$100 million when she made “Big” (1988). That movie, a comedy about a 12-year-old boy who magically turns into an adult (Tom Hanks) and then has to navigate the grown-up world, was as popular with critics as it was with audiences.

[An appraisal of Penny Marshall as Laverne.]

The Washington Post said it had “the zip and exuberance of a classic romantic comedy.” The Los Angeles Times described it as “a refreshingly grown-up comedy” directed “with verve and impeccable judgment.” Mr. Hanks received his first Oscar nomination for his performance.

Four years later she repeated her box-office success with “A League of Their Own,” a sentimentally spunky comedy about a wartime women’s baseball league with an ensemble cast that included Madonna, Geena Davis, Rosie O’Donnell and Mr. Hanks.

In between, she directed “Awakenings” (1990), a medical drama starring Robert De Niro as a patient coming out of an encephalitic trance and Robin Williams as the neurologist who helps him. “Awakenings,” based on a book by Oliver Sacks, was only moderately successful financially, but Mr. De Niro received an Academy Award nomination.

A writer for Cosmopolitan magazine once commented that Ms. Marshall “got into directing the ‘easy’ way — by becoming a television superstar first.” That was a reference to her seven seasons (1976-83) as Laverne DeFazio, the brasher (yet possibly more vulnerable) of two young

roommates, brewery assembly-line workers, on the hit ABC comedy series “Laverne & Shirley,” set in 1950s and '60s Milwaukee.

In Hollywood Ms. Marshall had a reputation for instinctive directing, which could mean endless retakes. But she was also known for treating filmmaking as a team effort rather than a dictatorship.

That may or may not have been a function of her self-effacing personality, which colleagues and interviewers often commented on. But in 1992 Ms. Marshall confessed to The New York Times Magazine that she wasn't completely guileless.

“I have my own way of functioning,” she said. “My personality is, I whine. It's how I feel inside. I guess it's how I use being female, too. I touch a lot to get my way and say, ‘*Pleeease*, do it over here.’ So it can be an advantage — the anti-director.”

That attitude was also an essential aspect of her humor. When Vanity Fair asked her to identify her greatest regret, she said, “That when I was a size 0, there was no size 0.”



Ms. Marshall in 2011. She became the first woman to direct a feature film that grossed more than \$100 million when she made “Big” in 1988.

Frederic J. Brown/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Carole Penny Marshall was born on Oct. 15, 1943, in the Bronx and grew up there, at the northern end of the Grand Concourse. Her father, Anthony, was an industrial filmmaker, and her mother, Marjorie (Ward) Marshall, taught dance. The family name had been changed from Masciarelli.

After she graduated from Walton High School, in the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx, Ms. Marshall attended the University of New Mexico. There she met and married Michael Henry, a college football player. They had a daughter, but the marriage lasted only two years, and Ms. Marshall headed for California, where her older brother, Garry, had become a successful comedy writer.

She made her film debut in “The Savage Seven,” a 1968 biker-gang drama, and had a small part the same year in “How Sweet It Is!,” a romantic comedy starring Debbie Reynolds and James Garner.

Ms. Marshall continued acting, mostly playing guest roles on television series, until she got her big break in 1971, when she was cast in the recurring part of Jack Klugman’s gloomy secretary, Myrna Turner, on the ABC sitcom “The Odd Couple.” Her brother, a producer of the show, got her the job, but nepotism had nothing to do with it when viewers fell in love with her poker-faced humor and Bronx-accented whine.

That same year she married Rob Reiner, who was then a star of the hit series “All in the Family.” He adopted her daughter, but they divorced in 1981, when “Laverne & Shirley” and Ms. Marshall were at the height of their television popularity.

That series grew out of a 1975 episode of “Happy Days,” in which Laverne (Ms. Marshall) and Shirley Feeney (Cindy Williams), two fast blue-collar girls, turned up at the local hangout as blind dates for Richie Cunningham and Fonzie, the two lead characters.

When “Laverne & Shirley” ended in 1983, after considerable on-set conflict between the co-stars and a final season without Ms. Williams, it was the first time in 12 years that Ms. Marshall had not had at least a relatively steady job on a television series.

She began making a handful of films and television appearances. Then Whoopi Goldberg, a friend, asked her to take over for a director she wasn’t getting along with on “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” (1986), a comic spy caper. (Ms. Marshall had directed a few episodes of “Laverne & Shirley.”) The movie was far from an unqualified success, but it led to “Big.”

Robert Loggia, left, and Tom Hanks starred in the 1988 film “Big,” directed by Ms. Marshall. A story of a 12-year-old boy who magically turns into an adult, it was as popular with critics as it was with audiences. Brian Hamill/20th Century Fox

Ms. Marshall’s two films after “A League of Their Own” were not as well received. “Renaissance Man” (1994), starring Danny DeVito as an adman turned teacher of Army recruits, was savaged by critics and earned only about \$24 million, considerably less than it cost to make, in the United States (in contrast, “Big” earned almost \$115 million). “The Preacher’s Wife” (1996), a remake of the heartwarming 1947 fantasy romance “The Bishop’s Wife,” starred Denzel Washington and Whitney Houston. Critics found it likable but weak, and it brought in just under \$50 million domestically.

Ms. Marshall did not direct again until 2001. “Riding in Cars With Boys,” a saga of teenage motherhood starring Drew Barrymore, earned mostly positive reviews but was a box-office disappointment. It was the last film Ms. Marshall directed. Her farewell to television direction was a 2011 episode of the multiple-personalities series “United States of Tara.”

She devoted some time to producing, notably with the 2005 movie inspired by the classic sitcom “Bewitched,” and took on the occasional acting job, including a 2012 guest spot on the series “Portlandia” and voice-over narration in the film “Mother’s Day” (2016), directed by Garry Marshall, who died in 2016.

In 2012 she published a best-selling memoir, “My Mother Was Nuts,” which began in her characteristically self-effacing way:

“I’m not someone who’s had to deal with much personal drama outside of the usual: growing up with parents who hated each other, two marriages and divorces, the ups and downs of various relationships, raising a daughter and watching friends crack up and overdose. There was the cancer thing, too. As you can see, though, there’s nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that most people don’t go through, nothing that says, ‘Penny, you were lucky to get through that one.’ ”

Her final screen appearance was on the new version of “The Odd Couple,” in a November 2016 episode that was a tribute to her brother, and featured cameos by stars from his many hit series.

Ms. Marshall on set of the movie “Big” in 1988. She went on to direct “A League of Their Own” and other films. Kerry Hayes/Twentieth Century Fox

Ms. Marshall, who lived in the Hollywood Hills section of Los Angeles, is survived by her older sister, Ronny; a daughter, the actress Tracy Reiner; and three grandchildren.

Critics sometimes accused Ms. Marshall of being overly sentimental, but she never apologized for that side of her work.

“I like something that tells a story or that tells me something I didn’t know,” she told The San Diego Union-Tribune in 1992 when asked about her taste in films. “It should have humor in it — or it should have heart.”

“And if it doesn’t,” she added, with what the reporter described as a sly grin, “I’ll make it have heart.”

Correction: December 18, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary misstated Ms. Marshall’s age and the year she was born. She was 75, not 76, and was born on Oct. 15, 1943, not 1942. An earlier version of a capsule summary with this obituary misstated part of the name of a movie Ms. Marshall directed. It is “A League of Their

Own,” not “A League of Her Own.”

Correction: December 21, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary misstated the year Ms. Marshall and Rob Reiner divorced. It was 1981, not 1979.

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